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ABSTRACT

The University of Washington is developing a mandatory teaching portfolio system for its writing program teaching assistants (TAs) to help graduate students in the job market and to create a fairer and more useful way to review teachers while they are working in the writing program. Implementation of the 3-stage program is taking place over 4 years. The first stage of implementation (the program is now in stage two) deals with "familiarization." It: (1) focuses on the advantages of portfolios for job seekers; (2) educates faculty to the advantages of portfolios; and (3) uses portfolios as a basis for teaching awards and for letters of recommendation. Stage two involves implementation procedures by further developing the award structure and extending first-year TA training. During stage three the program will continue to adjust earlier steps and the program will be expanded to an annual review where TAs will be evaluated on the basis of their portfolios. (Four illustrations are attached which provide: guides to portfolio content; criteria for portfolio content; criteria for portfolio model assignments; and an implementation outline.) (NH)

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Great Expectations: Introducing Teaching Portfolios to a University Writing Program

Convinced that Teaching Portfolios offer both teachers and the programs they work in many advantages, the University of Washington is developing a mandatory Teaching Portfolio system for its writing program teaching assistants. We expect much--we expect Teaching Portfolios, for example, to help our graduate students on the job market both by documenting the breadth of experience our teachers have had in their careers with us, and by creating before they ever reach the job market occasions for reflection about pedagogy which will make them better able to describe to potential employers both what they do in classrooms, and why they do it. As administrators we also expect Teaching Portfolios to create a fairer and more useful way to review teachers while they are in our program. Further, we expect that portfolios will foster a stronger teaching sub-culture throughout our program by encouraging thought and talk about teaching. And, finally, we also expect our classrooms to become more interesting places to be not just for our teachers, but for our undergraduates as well.

All those are virtues; indeed, a Teaching Portfolio program seems a perfect win-win situation. Administrators get better insight into classroom performance, along with better ways to identify and help those who need it, while graduate students TAs are empowered to develop concrete materials which will unquestionably serve their self-interests as they look ahead first to

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getting a job and then to tenure decisions. That combination of interests seemed so powerful enough to us, in fact, that we thought the implementation of a Teaching Portfolio would be a relatively easy. That hasn't proved true; though we are making progress, doing so has been slower than most of us imagined it would be. In this presentation, I will describe not only the means by which we've been implementing our system, but also some of the reasons why a plan which originally seemed achievable within two years will in fact take something like four.

Before beginning, however, I stress that I am aware that a number of other institutions have already installed such programs, some of which are likely to be more complex than ours is or will be. For them this is coals to Newcastle; I don't mean to speak either *for* them or *at* them. Every program is different, and what works one place may not work elsewhere. This paper is not advice, only a report on what we have done and why.

We see our implementation as essentially a three stage program, taking place over four years. As I've already said, at first we thought we'd move faster. Originally, we outlined Teaching Portfolios to potential job seekers, and explained them carefully to all TAs, and waited for people to embrace the concept. But nothing happened. Though the idea made perfect sense to us, it seemed to interest no one else. Even job seekers didn't pursue the idea. We have since given thought to the sources of resistance, and have tailored our current approach to what we think we have seen.

And what do we think we have seen? Mainly that the resistance has been remarkable for its not being either organized or vocal; rather it seems to come from deeper, vaguer counterpressures--many having to do with our own English Department's attitudes and values.

Sources of Resistance:

Category #1: General English Department ignorance and fear. Ours is a large, research-oriented department, where teaching is a concern in constant competition with publication. Yet though we knew this, we didn't see clearly enough the full effect of faculty role models on our TAs. Because we weren't even vaguely suggesting that faculty construct portfolios, neither did we carry out an educational campaign about Teaching Portfolios among our colleagues. That was an error. Though our faculty has many very fine teachers, many nevertheless still see their classrooms as scenes of distress, even of potential failure. Like many teachers elsewhere--and again, many of them good ones--they resist all kinds of evaluation of their own classes (believing, as they do, that the only things that can be learned from such evaluations are the dimensions of their [often only imagined] inadequacy), and they rationalize this with attitudes about teaching which minimize the possibility that evaluation would make them better teachers in the first place. This attitude is communicated to TAs, sometimes directly, but more often indirectly, by comments about teaching interfering with a life of research, or, on a more positive note, as a pretty much spontaneous affair for which planning and reflection are neither necessary nor imaginably helpful.

Given this way of thinking about teaching--which implies as well that one gets better at it, if at all, only through the effects of experience, and not by study--some of my colleagues simply can't see what good a portfolio would do anyone. And thus not only do they not actively counsel job candidates to prepare Teaching Portfolios, but when their students ask them whether such a portfolio would in fact help a candidate's job chances, not seeing why one would create such a portfolio in the first place, and in their own work on hiring committees feeling much more comfortable with "writing" samples than

with "teaching" samples, my colleagues do not support the idea. Yet without that support, graduate students figure that a portfolio must not be much after all.

Category 2: Graduate Student Ignorance and Fear. This is actually less than the faculty's, principally because we've already introduced Writing Portfolios into our program, and TAs have seen how helpful those can be to their students, and because TAs also already expect a certain amount of oversight. Administrators will have to be doing something to oversee and review their work, so it may as well be Teaching Portfolios. Nevertheless, worries about having someone actually know what you do when you teach remain very lively among our teachers. Like many of us, they fear authority, and are leery of anything that comes to them from the top. While there has been no active opposition, then, neither has there been spontaneous acceptance.

Category 3: Time. Everyone here is busy, and when you've already spent a lot of time teaching and you have a pair of seminar papers to write, then given the choice between teaching unreflectively day-by-day, and spending extra hours developing something that is supposed to be good for you--but might not really be, maintaining the status quo usually wins.

In response to those and similar sources of resistance, we have developed three planning principles: 1) Begin with those dimensions of Teaching Portfolios which highlight and reinforce teaching strengths and TA self-interest. Though it seems obvious to us that Teaching Portfolios--properly used, and viewed in contrast to other measures which oversight mandates would require--are virtually bound to be in any teacher's self-interest, not all of those affected will see it that way, so we decided to begin at those points where objections are least possible. 2) Work gradually, and in conjunction

with efforts to educate faculty as well as TAs. Our institution's academic culture is not unusual in imagining that almost all change should be viewed with suspicion. Without clear and public rationales, change will be resisted. 3) Start the mandatory dimensions of program change with teachers new to the program. Turnover among TAs being rapid, within three years virtually all will be on the new system.

Implementation: Stage 1--Year 1: Familiarization

The first stage of our implementation--we are now in stage two--attacked the problem on several fronts.

1) Job Market. We focused first and most directly on job seekers, explaining what a Teaching Portfolio is, why one would construct one, how one might go about it. (Illustration 1) We couched this almost entirely in terms of self-interest; as I've already said, we have found less responsiveness than we expected. I've outlined some reasons above; I think there is also a (reasonable) fear of doing something in a job application that is at all different or weird, and the idea of a Teaching Portfolio still seems that way to them. Nevertheless, we both gave out materials (a copy of the latest version is here if you are interested), and met with job seekers and the faculty advisory committee.

2) Faculty Education. First, we have made a point of talking to colleagues informally; but we have also raised the issue of teaching portfolios on various faculty committees. We have raised it in the context of oversight and career development to our graduate studies committee; we've asked our hiring committees to think about foregrounding requests for teaching materials in our own hiring process. We have had positive results: this year for the first

time the Department is sending out such requests in its responses to people applying for positions here; next year the Department will include mention of teaching materials in its ad copy. This move is important not just as an example for our own candidates, but also to educate the faculty. After actually having seen some of these materials, we expect that many will see how useful they in fact are, and will go on to recommend to their advisees that they take the production of such materials seriously.

3) Award structure. We have a TA Distinguished Teaching Award. It used to be awarded based solely on student letters of recommendation and numerical rating forms. We have now asked candidates for this award to submit classroom materials to show what they do, and to help us interpret student praise. Those materials are, of course, tantamount to portfolios; this year I'll be asking graduate students to work with faculty to establish a format which will make the submissions into actual portfolios (the same as we urge on job candidates).

4) Letters of Recommendation. As Director of the Expository Writing Program I write a lot of these; I've now begun telling students that I can't write very well for them unless they give me an array of teaching materials from which to work. I have urged this on other faculty as well, but that will take some time to develop.

Implementation: Stage 2--Years 2 and 3

Those steps were largely in place last year, or by early this Fall; this year we are extending the program in three ways:

1) Further Development of Award Structures. As I just mentioned, having inserted teaching materials into this process, and having had general

acceptance from graduate students of the sensibleness (if not the urgency) of doing so, I'm hopeful now that we can both formalize those submissions (using something very like the portfolio format I have offered to Job Seekers), and, even more important to our larger interests, that we can work together in the name of that award to develop a set of public criteria with which to judge these materials (illustration 2).

2) First-year TA Training: The Initial Teaching Portfolio. This is our most extensive move this year. For some time we have had first year TAs do an assignment design project in which they develop an assignment along with an explanation of its goals, its fit to our general program aims, and its relation to other assignments in the course. That has been very useful; this year we have put that project at the center of what we are calling the "Initial Teaching Portfolio" (Illustration 3). You'll note some variation from the Teaching Portfolio; because new teachers teach from a single, program supplied curriculum, they haven't had time or opportunity to develop their own representative materials. They can, however, both reflect on what they have done, and formulate plans for change. And they can also demonstrate via their assignment project their understanding of how to extrapolate from course principles to create new but conceptually consistent teaching material.

We expect the ITP to provide the structure upon which our TAs' growing classroom experience can be displayed. Just as important, this ITP will also form the basis for the first-year teaching review, placing the standardized rating form into the wider context of the course as described in the Reflective-projective essay, and thereby demonstrating (again) its teacher-friendly, constructive dimensions.

3) Review of Special TA Renewal Cases for Counseling/Renewal. One difficultly we now have in performing the faculty-code mandated review of TAs is a lack of information about those who have left the first-year course, and are now having trouble in subsequent terms. We haven't had an effective way to require that TAs maintain full files on their offerings, and the poorer teachers tend to generate and use less of such material in the first place. But when ratings from standardized forms suggest that someone is having significant difficulty, we expect this year to begin asking them to supply us with all their course materials for review. This--something like the reverse of the Award-induced portfolio--should produce a trouble-shooting portfolio to be used as a basis for discussion, class visits, and other performance counseling. In extreme cases, after we had worked with the TA to find and remedy problems, the trouble-shooting portfolio could also provide substantiation for non-renewal, though we truly don't expect that to happen very often.

Implementation: Stage 3--Year 4

Only being in stage 2 the implementation of our Teaching Portfolio program, it's hard to be absolutely certain about how stage 3 will go.

1) Continue and Adjust Earlier Steps. Step one is to continue all the efforts of stages 1 and 2. Some of those steps--like education of faculty--though already under weigh, still won't happen very quickly.

2) Require Teaching Portfolios for All TA Renewals. We plan by this time to be able to expand the program to an annual review. Our faculty code already requires that all TAs be evaluated annually in order to be renewed; we do this by numbers right now, the only obvious alternative having been classroom visits. But since class visits are both vastly time-consuming, and

not all that informative anyway (unless, of course, one visits a classroom repeatedly). But now that we've found Teaching Portfolios, we have hopes for a new day. Once three first-year classes have made their way through the Initial Teaching Portfolio, and once the Teaching Award Portfolios have become commonplace, and once TAs understand that a carefully developed Teaching Portfolio can indeed be helpful to them on the job market, this last step ought to seem a foregone conclusion.

That's what we have done, are doing, and plan to do. I've been administering a writing program long enough to know that nothing is as easy as it looks, but I truly have been surprised that this initiative would have to be introduced as slowly as we have now found ourselves doing it. Last fall I expected that I would be here today explaining a *fait accompli*. It turns out that change is scary, and this change proved no exception.

Illustration 1:

Possible Teaching Portfolio Contents

1. Table of Contents.

2. Teaching Summary (an extension/ duplication of information typically supplied in a vita, now including selected sample syllabi and descriptions for courses taught).

3. A Statement of Teaching Philosophy.

4. Brief Model Course (or Assignment) Design.

    a. Syllabus and rationale (teaching philosophy as it relates to this course).

    b. Assignments.

    c. Assignment support.

    d. Sample student response.

5. Evaluations: Copies of Assessment Center summaries.

6. Videotape, with cover sheet of explanation.

Illustration 2:

Criteria for Teaching Portfolio Model Assignments

Consistency. Does the assignment fit both the general course goals of 100-level English Composition program and the particular goals of the course in which you have used it?

Assignment Sequence. How does your assignment form a step in the over-all sequence of your course?

Definition. Is the assignment itself clearly defined in terms of its goals? What does it seek from students? What is its own internal rationale?

Appropriateness. Is the assignment appropriate to the level and abilities of the students you are teaching? Do students find it challenging, yet still manageable?

Articulation. Is the assignment itself written and presented clearly, so that students understand what they are supposed to be doing, and when? Have you clearly established for students a context within which to write?

Classwork. Have you outlined how the class sessions develop your students' interest and conceptual skills so that they can deal effectively with the task you present them? Are the pre-writing and engagement exercises you use consistent both with the assignment, and with the general principles of 100-level English courses?

Illustration 3:

The Initial Teaching Portfolio

1. Table of Contents.

2. Teaching Summary: brief descriptions/ syllabi for courses you've taught. (This may be simply your syllabi for 131 for Fall and Winter; for those of you with other teaching experience, I encourage [but don't require] you to include it here in whatever ways make sense to you.)

3. A short Reflective-Projective essay on your first quarter's teaching in 131. (4-5pp.)

4. Brief Model Assignment for an assignment you might use in 131 in future quarters. (NO MORE THAN 10 pp.)

   a. Assignment.

   b. Rationale: how this assignment fits the goals and methods of this course.

   c. Assignment support: Brief daily schedule and explanation of how you would actually go about teaching the assignment.

5. Evaluations: Copies of Assessment center summaries.

Teaching Portfolios: Implementation Outline

Stage 1--Year 1:

1) Introduce Teaching Portfolios to Job Candidates.

2) Faculty Education.

3) Change Award structure.

4) Letters of Recommendation.

Stage 2--Years 2 and 3:

1) Further Development of Award Structures.

2) First-year TA Training: The Initial Teaching Portfolio.

3) Review of Special TA Renewal Cases for Counseling/Renewal.

Stage 3--Year 4:

1) Continue and Adjust Earlier Steps.

2) Require Teaching Portfolios for All TA Renewals.